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Policy Brief

UZBEKISTAN

ABSTRACT

This Policy Brief provides analysis of the key issues in the prevention of online extremism in Uzbekistan, as well as a summary of a comprehensive study of the narratives and attitudes broadcast by violent extremist organizations and leaders through online platforms. Recommendations were made based on the data obtained to the main stakeholders involved in the prevention of violent extremism.

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INTRODUCTION

The propaganda of religiously motivated violent extremism (RMVE) is still not included in the notion of global cyber security, which is mainly focused on issues of protection against cyber-attacks, against intrusions into the electoral processes of countries, on the methods of waging cyber war, etc.¹ As recent studies have shown, the propaganda of RMVE in cyberspace the content of which is addressed to the Central Asian countries, is reaching a very serious scale. The propaganda covers large segments of the population, primarily young people. Thus, the ideology of VE *immigrated into the media space*, making up the most mobile, intensively used, and content-heavy part of social networks.

These kinds of observations prove the *exceptional relevance* of the implemented regional study of the problem of radicalization leading to violent extremism in Central Asia (2020). The research is placed in the context of the whole Internews project "Strengthening Resilience to Radicalization and Disinformation in Central Asia," funded by the European Union. The project seeks to find ways to prevent radicalization leading to violence by increasing the effectiveness of media strategies, a more effective response of state and non-state actors to increasing the radicalization of youth and improving methods of counterpropaganda.

¹ The First Cyber Espionage Attacks: How Operation Moonlight Maze made history – Chris Doman, 2016 (https://medium.com/@chris_doman/the-first-sophisticated-cyber-attacks-how-operation-moonlight-maze-made-history-2adb12cc43f7).

In *approaches and methods*, this study appeals to theories of social movements, the collective identity of which is manifested in values and communicative practices.² In the CA region, religion (Islam) has become a factor not only of ideological or social, but also of political mobilization, in which religious leaders seek to play an independent role, promoting their own discourses and narratives. In line with the objectives of the project, the study focuses on the methods of mobilization and narratives promoted by the propagandists of "total jihad" who have proposed their own configurations of identity, "the best political arrangements for Muslims in the region". Social movement theories also provides a framework for the further development of relevant communication strategies. So, in relation to this task of the project, the highest levels of engagement with messages (frame) is obtained when the protagonists we study correlate with the preferences and aspirations of the individual or group - value orientations - of a specific consumer audience. This statement is also a key in developing PVE communication strategies. Recommendations for the development of counter- and alternative narratives also point out that "it is important to create a narrative not only by relying on what emotions it evokes, but also by conveying certain values in it".³

The main goals set in this document include reviews of the media strategies of the most popular channels and bloggers who are trying to legitimize and popularize the ideology of jihad, analyses of the content of posted texts, as well as suggestions including possible measures to prevent online propaganda of the RMVE. The main tasks were chosen: to describe the current context and drivers of radicalization, to study the methods of media propaganda of the VE ideology, to establish the peculiarity of the audience of propagandists by studying comments, to conduct a comprehensive content analysis, focusing on the features of narratives and methods of propaganda (methods of religious argumentation, methods of psychological influence, specifics of the design of videos, etc.). To formulate specific proposals to counter VE ideology, including with recommendations on improving the effectiveness of alternative social networks, on developing new approaches to the formation of media strategies and countermeasures, in accordance with the research findings.

UZBEKISTAN'S CONTEXT FOR COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM

The forms of religiously motivated radicalization are the product of a combination of different causes, both structural and personal, and they can have completely different effects on each person. Given the general socio-economic, political and other factors, a significant part of the population is not radicalized. The same statement is true for attempts to select the most vulnerable groups (women, youth, migrants, ethnic enclaves, etc.).

The main argument for the vulnerability of all and each individual disposition is that these factors equally affect hundreds of thousands of believers, but the smallest share of them (some experts believe it to be no more than 0.005% of the total number of believers in CA⁴) is involved with jihadists. Some researchers talk about excessive victimization of the problem of Islam and exaggeration of threats.⁵ The insignificance of the number of those involved should not be misleading, given those who participate in the jihad with "property" (Ishtirak bi-l-mal), that is, transfer of various amounts of money to proxies. This means that the researchers do not take into account the dogmatic and legal interpretation of jihad, which allows various forms of "war in the path of Allah," without direct participation in hostilities.

² C.Crossett and J.Spitaletta, Radicalization: Relevant psychological and sociological concepts (Ft.Meade, MD: U.S.Army Assymetric Welfare Group, September 2010), 10. [https://info.publicintelligence.net/USArmy_Review_of_Social_Science_Theories_Journal_of_Strategic_Security_4_no.4_\(2012\):7-36.DOI:](https://info.publicintelligence.net/USArmy_Review_of_Social_Science_Theories_Journal_of_Strategic_Security_4_no.4_(2012):7-36.DOI:) <http://dx.doi.org/10.5038/1944-0472.4.4.1/>.

³ Research of alternative and counter-narratives in the media space of Kyrgyzstan. GIIP, 2019 - <https://internetpolicy.kg/2019/06/29/issledovanie-alternativnyh-i-kontr-narrativov-v-media-prostranstve-kyrgyzstana>.

⁴ Edward Lemon. On Terrorist Threats in Central Asia and Beyond (2019), <https://caa-network.org/archives/14501>.

⁵ Noah Tucker, Terrorism without a God. Reconsidering Radicalization and Counter- Radicalization Models in Central Asia, CAP papers, No. 225 (2019), <https://centralasiaprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/CAP-paper-225-September-2019-1.pdf>; J. Heathershaw & D. Montgomery, The Myth of Post-Soviet Muslim Radicalization (2014), https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/field/field_document/2014-11/14%20Myth%20summary%20v2b.pdf.

One of the ideological reasons for the relative popularity of VE ideologies in Uzbekistan is associated with the suppression of alternative ways of expressing personal opinion or protest, especially young people who always want to be heard, to unite in unions, outside the control of the state. Another reason is the lack of effective political parties,⁶ based on secular ideologies and capable of carrying out independent and attractive political activities. The same can be said about independent journalists, representatives of NGOs, who are still limited in expressing their opinions, especially in "religious topics," due to the actual restriction of freedom of speech. With these restrictions the authorities themselves create a huge amount of ideological, propagandistic, and other conditions that directly stimulate the "Islamic choice" in expressing protests. Consequently, it should be said that the existing suppression of non-religious types of political activity (as a political, ideological, propaganda dilemma) or restrictions on other opportunities for expressing discontent or protest, prompts us to turn to an alternative, namely, jihadist ideology (which, under certain conditions, can be categorized as a protest too).⁷

Modern discourses in Uzbekistan, (mainly in the ideological, propaganda and educational spheres) are built on a number of other misconceptions that become invisible factors in the politicization of Islam and which are not fully adequately assessed by experts and politicians when it comes to the drivers of radicalism and countering them. This refers to the attempts of the state to initiate "Enlightened Islam"⁸, to contrast it with radical versions. The initiators of this ideologeme are trying to formulate it in artificial, extremely unstable, and distorted for Islam discourses, giving rise to a number of legal, doctrinal and ideological problems. This ill-conceived strategy rather contributes to the internalization of the problem of radical ideologies, at least by creating a mental basis for them and encouraging interest in intolerant versions of Islam.

Based on the results of the research it is possible to conclude that Uzbekistan's official policy in regulating "state-religion" relations fosters confessional acculturation and various forms of ideological alienation, which create direct conditions for replacing secular values with Islamic ones. The religion of the ideological discourse of the state gives rise to a number of paradoxes that contradict the basic norms of law.

Despite the existence of a legislative framework, there are a number of systemic problems and shortcomings in this area, among which the absence of a single coordinating state body can be noted. The Ministry of Information Communications of the Republic of Uzbekistan is responsible for the implementation of measures to ensure information security and the introduction of modern technologies for the protection of communication networks; the task of ensuring the implementation of the constitutional rights of citizens to freedom of speech and information, strengthening the role of the media in the socio-political and socio-economic development of the country is entrusted to the Agency for Information and Mass Communications under the Presidential Administration. There are number of critical remarks about its activities, in particular, unprofessional work with media resources, lack of legislative initiatives. The practice of separate regulation of public relations in the field of cybersecurity leads to systemic problems, and most legislative acts in this industry are of a framework nature and do not provide for specific mechanisms, which leads to the regulation of public relations mainly by bylaws or departmental acts.

⁶ The "pocket parties" that exist in Uzbekistan and are loyal to the authorities cannot be taken into account.

⁷ Results of preliminary research of independent journalists' media channels in the "... UZ" domain.

⁸ This idea was voiced in the official speech of the President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly - <https://ua.uz/ru/posts/prezident-uzbekistana-shavkat-mirziyeev-vystupil-na-72-y-ses-20-09-2017>.

CHANNELS AND PROPAGANDISTS

Content analysis was carried out based on the selected material on the Brand Analytics platform (monitoring from 01.01.2019 to 01.05.2020). The number of messages with Uzbek-language content of extremist propaganda, including self-identified ones, amounted to 227,600 messages, of which 2,312 were selected.

The most popular sources (channels) for the distribution of VE content: "Od-noklassniki" (Ok.ru), Telegram⁹, WhatsApp, and YouTube.¹⁰ These platforms are uncontrolled, easy for the average person to use, and allow for easy follow-up. All platforms are very convenient for creating group chats, convenient for publishing material, commenting as well as for reposting.

The same agent (propagandist) posts his materials on different platforms using different addresses (see figure). The channels and chats of the jihad propagandists in all the named resources are becoming a kind of "discussion club." Critical comments stimulate heated discussions, sometimes turning into aggressive attacks by the Mujahideen or established carriers of VE ideology. By regulating the quantity and quality of comments, administrators use criticism and feedback from ideologically mature recipients to overcome the doubts of those who are hesitant.

Channels (including Internet, TV) and short biographies of the main propagandists of jihad were observed,¹¹ their views and preferences, features of theological erudition, ways of promotion, etc. Examples include Abdullah Zufar (channels: Zufar123, Aqida_darslari, and others), Abu Saloh/Abu Salohii (Sirodjidin Muhtarov), channels "Katibat tawhid val-Jihod," "Jannat Oshiqlari," Mahmoud Abdalmumin (Mahmoud Holdorov/Abdulumin), channel Echim Is-lomda/"Decision in Islam" and others.

In different types of studied content, their mutual criticism is noticeable, however, with the obvious desire of each of them to prove their own superiority as a theologian-teacher or defending their exclusive right to speak for the mujahideen. On these grounds, the protagonists of jihad from CA countries can be divided into three groups:

1. Propagandists with a fairly high religious erudition, received mainly from the Salafis in Arab countries. They took upon themselves the task of legitimizing the militant jihad, explaining its conditions (with numerous references to the Quran, Sunnah, and partly sources of law), they pay special attention to the ethics of the behavior of the Mujahideen, they explain events in the world from the point of view of permanent, as they believe, confrontation between Muslims and «infidels,» etc.
2. Propagandists with experience of fighting in hot spots (Afghanistan, Middle East). They are inferior to the first group of propagandists in knowledge and methods of interpretation of the texts, in their actualization for specific cases with the help of religious arguments (usuls), in knowledge of the historical tradition, etc. But they are trying to replace this with extremely simplified and emotional videos.
3. A third group of propagandists takes a more restrained position, especially regarding the relevance of jihad in Syria and Iraq, saying that this war is not prepared, that there are other ways of "world victories" for Muslims, for example, peaceful conquest of power by participating in elections, when the appropriate conditions are ripe for this. They believe that immigrant theologians must return sooner or later to help nominate a ruler (President) who will be "from Muslims." These plans look like a maximum program, which, of course, requires the unification of jihadist ideologues of different composition and strategy, which the propagandists of this group call for.

⁹ For instance the most popular channel on Telegram is <https://t.me/Islamictalkss>.

¹⁰ Example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lJhbS-4pKuY>.

¹¹ Their names are most often given in the Latin alphabet, as they themselves prefer in their channels.

MEDIA PROPAGANDA AND MANIPULATION METHODS

The full report presents two sides of this kind of virtual communication between the recipient of information - the recipients (as victims of verbal and ideological manipulations) and the protagonists/propagandists ("broadcasters") of the VE ideology themselves. There are three stages of group and individual methods of involving recipients.

1. Preliminary stage. Throwing targeted information into group chats, then selecting responders in individual or group chats.
2. The selection of the most suggestible recipients and the offer to join (subscribe) to the "separate chat of brothers," the formation of a group identity, the selection of special narratives (in the form of audio and video clips) that form the feeling of an inner group ("us"). Direct communication with the main propagandist who answers their questions, gives personal advice, etc. The propagandist, resorting to sympathy and consolation, tries to instill a victimization of the current state of his "students," to reformat their individual problems as part of the common Muslim issues.
3. At this stage, the recipients receive videos, which are divided into two main blocks: the first block contains the religious rationale for jihad (with references the Quran and hadith); the second block includes live reports from battlefields (mainly from the Middle East). The imagination of the recipients fills with a gallery of "selfless heroes" who are ready to give their lives "for Allah and the sacred faith." The virtual images of their videos become part of real life, suppressing the ability to rationalize and think. Moreover, the basis of group identity is *religion, which suppresses agnosticism and reduces the ability to think rationally.*

Thus, the propagandists of the ideology of jihad manage to offer an attractive "information model," quite skillfully creating new ones. In narratives with examples of "the ethics of the best mujahid" there is always a main actor - the narrator himself (propagandist, ustoz), as a teacher of "real Islam" calling for protecting "The violated rights of Muslims," who "sincerely" weeps when he talks about "oppressed Muslims," "the treachery of infidels and apostates from Islam," and such topics. Therefore, the media image of the fearless hero is associated primarily with this speaker whose call is the "call of Islam."

Thus, the propagandists of the ideology of jihad succeed in offering an attractive "information model," rather skillfully creating new (group) identities by manipulating simplified interpretations of sacred texts, "sacred history," other sources of communication aimed at young people. The image of a heroic mujahid combines an emotional perception of reality, its religious virtualization, associated with the instilled altruistic mission he is carrying out, however, for the sake of reward in that world. Death itself becomes the highest meaning of new life on the battlefield. Propagandists create the illusion of the chosenness of the Mujahideen, a form of their self-esteem, and keep these young people under the illusion that they are important, that they are chosen to achieve what the overwhelming majority of Muslims cannot achieve, due to weakness or "betrayal of religion" from the rest of the Muslims.

Among the recruits (judging by their comments), there were no attempts to understand or master a minimum of knowledge about the 'versions' of Islam imposed on them. Their impulse is rather built on emotions, latently associated with personal problems and addictions, in no way connected with even superficial knowledge. For the majority of those involved, recruitment in a simplified form becomes just a *change of the "Islamic brand,"* that is, "*government/state Islam,*" which has clearly outlived itself, to "a just Islam," which is allegedly associated with the name of the Prophet and his companions and therefore is able to solve the problems of not only Muslims but the whole world. Therefore, in most cases, *recruitment is extremely rarely the result of a deep spiritual and intellectual search.* The only exception can be made by the intellectual elite.

COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES AND METHODS OF PROPAGANDA AMONG THE IDEOLOGUES OF VE

The propaganda machine of IS and similar organizations was conducted in at least 23 languages and the published content began to be studied almost from the moment it was posted on the networks.¹² The VE propagandists from Central Asia have obvious similarities in the strategies of disseminating material, methods of gaining the audience's attention, argumentation, and musical design, which are most likely borrowed from the content of global networks of Salafis and jihadists.

So far, we see an attempt to build our own strategies in the media space, ways to attract listeners, counter-propaganda against the state media and against independent bloggers-theologians, we see only in a special lesson by A. Zufar.¹³ He tries to systematize VE propaganda based on: 1. The active use of the capabilities of the Internet and Web applications (instant distribution, wide availability, etc.), the use of the most popular hashtags (for example, "hijrat," "jihad"); 2. A careful study of the weaknesses of official propaganda, which prefers a standard language and is unable to keep the attention of socially active listeners; 3. The use of different methods of raising your own rating. For example, "reverse advertising" directed at terrorists, which is so intensified, but also promoted monotonously and in a standardized language by the official means of counter-propaganda or the media influenced by them.

In general, the main result of the propaganda activity of Salafis from Central Asia (including jihadists) over the past 7-8 years has been the formation of an autonomous information space, which has developed its own methods of propaganda, homegrown strategies of communication, control over the audience, and multilateral chats, dialogue platforms, etc. what the official media lacks.

KEY VIOLENT NARRATIVES

In the modern world, any "hot war" is preceded or accompanied by an information war, which is dozens of times larger than a relatively limited zone of armed conflict. The ISIS case is perhaps the most revealing. It has a dedicated segment for "non-Arabs" (ajami) in 22 languages. The studied content of the Uzbek-language jihad propaganda block in many respects repeats the compositional structure, selections of video series or the musical design of ISIS videos. However, the plots and forms of propaganda, the appeal to values are based on their own audience, as well as on the personal erudition, experience and perception of propagandists, their assessment of jihad and its forms, which, in their opinion, are relevant in the modern world. Discussions and hidden competition are noticeable between them.

Basically, two forms of "information delivery" are used: audio and video clips. Audio clips are accompanied by alternating slideshows: photos of famous propagandists of modern jihad, brief information about the channel, addresses and phone numbers of recruiting agents, and more often - texts of hadith legitimizing jihad and especially "jihad in Sham/Syria." Sometimes these are symbolic drawings, borrowed, for example, from collages explaining Darwin's theory of evolution.

An obligatory component of the texts is references to the Quran and Sunnah (hadith), including the stories of the Prophet and his companions. Here, quotes from religious texts in Arabic are especially significant, which creates an "authority effect" that forms the meaning and norm of correct behavior (the language of "religious truth").

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¹² See the example: Report: ISIS Backers Used at Least 46,000 Twitter Accounts in 2014. In: WSJ. 6 March 2015.

¹³ Нух даъвати усуллари / Nuh propaganda methods. (Abu Abdulloh-20200918t120706z-001.zip\abu abduloh. zip архив).

The most common stories relate to immigration for religious reasons (*hijrat*) and involvement in the "holy jihad in Sham." This is the direct task of the propagandists, but the most difficult one since it is necessary to prove the "obvious religious duty" (farz-i 'ain) of these actions from the point of view of their religious legitimacy. The main message of this multi-stage propaganda is to prove that jihad is not being waged on "foreign territory," but in "the territory of Islam" (Dar ul-Islam) and that participation in it is the duty of all Muslims. All propagandists agreed that for all who make the *exodus/hijrat this is the first step towards jihad.*¹⁴

It is important to literally *lure* a potential Mujahid out of his home country, or the country where he works. The set of arguments here is based on the simplest logic. The home country or state where you work cannot be considered "comfortable for Muslims," since they are "ruled by infidels or apostates/tagut" (i.e., here we are talking about the secular regime. The most common examples are Central Asian countries or Russia), where according to propagandists, the ruling regimes prohibit Muslim women from wearing hijabs, men beards, limit the attendance of mosques for teenagers, insult the Prophet and Islam, or simply "do not like Muslims," and so on. Conclusion - these countries are in the status of "Dar ul-zulm" "Territory of oppression of Muslims", from where Muslims are ordered to immigrate (perform *hijrat*). For more aggressive propagandists, the territory of Central Asia is "Dar ul-kharb" "the place where the war against Muslims is being waged". This status implies the admissibility of waging "jihad" in their own countries.¹⁵

The norms of conduct (ethics) of the mujahid are included in the "Lessons" of each of the propagandists, with the usual titles like "Odob Darsliclari," or "Ethics Lessons". This series is addressed either to the persons involved or more often to the Mujahideen, since in their ranks there was a massive violation of the norms of Muslim ethics: addiction to alcohol (sometimes drugs), cases of gang rapes by the Mujahideen of captured Zaydite girls,¹⁷ Shiite and other phenomena.¹⁸ This prompted the propagandists to create a series of "lessons" systematically explaining the ethics of the Mujahid's behavior.

The image of the victorious mujahid. Here, imitations of ISIS video products are obvious, in which the Mujahideen appear as a brotherhood of staunch and ideological warriors who are ready to give their lives "for the triumph of Allah's commands" and bring the victory of Islam throughout the world. The created image of the winner of the "disbelief of the infidels" is supported by effectively and spectacularly filmed footage from the battlefields; young mujahideen marching in line or shooting on the run, who give interviews in moments of lull and tell clearly prepared remarks about the "sacred mission of the mujahidin" that has fallen to their lot, urge their peers not to sit at home in vain and join them. The video sequences are accompanied by songs of jihadists (nasheeda) popular in this environment.

The status of a martyr and the awards promised to him. In the videos of the second group, propagandists list the following "awards to a martyr" who died on the battlefields in Syria and Iraq: 1) All his sins are forgiven with the first drop of blood; 2) Before his death, he will see his place in paradise; 3) In paradise, the martyr will be dressed in the clean clothes of a true believer; 4) He will be freed from suffering in the grave; 5) He will be delivered from fear; 6) A crown will be put on his head. One stone in this crown is better and more valuable than all the jewels in the world; 7) Shahid will marry 72 paradise hurias. And he has the right to lead 70 of his loved ones to paradise.¹⁸ The propagandists tried to give not just the highest, sacred meaning of the "heroic death," but reminded of the rewards in the next life. The irrationality of such promises, apparently, made some young mujahideen doubtful, and they turned with questions and doubts to their emirs (anonymously or under pseudonyms), receiving in response harsh remarks accusing the Prophet of disbelief and possible punishment for such disbelief.¹⁹

Should I ask my parents for permission for hijrat and jihad? This topic is the most discussed and potential recipients often ask about it. Usually, most modern Sunni theologians, when answering this question, refer to a hadith from the Prophet, from whom one of his companions asked permission for jihad. However, the Prophet was aware of the plight of his parents and advised him to look after his father and mother, declaring that "this will be the best jihad" for him.

¹⁴ In more details: Abu Muovia. Ибодат шартлари (Шурути ибодат/ Terms of worship). «Al-Haqq» Studio. Lesson 8 (from 20.07. 2020). Archive.

¹⁵ "Jihod Farzi ayn. Abdulloh Zufar darsliklari/Jihad is an obvious religious prescription. Lesson of Abdulloh Zufor" (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9zTB1x3i28g>. 13. 01. 20 20. 4 722 views. 553 like, 17 dislikes).

¹⁶ Zufar criticizes the field commanders who gave the mujahideen such a fatwa - "to take away by force the login as concubines and resell them to each other" (Archive: Balo kelish sabablari/ The causes of our disasters _ Shayx Abdulloh Zufar Hafizahulloh.mp4. April 4, 2020.).

¹⁷ Vera Mironova. From Freedom Fighter to Jihadist: Human Resource of Non State Armed Groups. Human Resources of Non State Armed Groups. Harvard: Harvard University Press. 2019.

¹⁸ Abdulkhafiz. Jihad lesson. (https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLQ8VkxGnOG87hwZ9W_DsIFTuHN7NmGbHY). The hadith, in which these "awards to martyrdom" are repeated in different variations, is authentic. In various editions of «al-Sahih» Imam al-Bukhari under № 1374/5. See also archive: Jihoddan maqsadimiz/The aim of our Jihad. www.jannatoshiqlari.net. jannatoshi... 00:32:50. 9 723 downloads.

¹⁹ Ibid. Young Mujahideen addressed the same questions to the mentioned blogger A. Mukhtor-Ali.

The propagandists reject the veracity of this hadith and resort to both dogmatic and rational tricks. According to their reasoning, jihad is elevated to the rank of iman (faith) and ritual duty ('ibadat). From this it is concluded that one does not have to ask their parent's permission .

Eschatology (especially the discussion of the signs of the Day of Judgment) is one of the favorite methods of persuading the destiny of the Mujahid, who "had a great mission to participate in the last jihad prescribed by the Prophet with the crusaders in the Sham region (historical Suria/Syria)," where the Messiah (Mahdi) is expected to appear. The comparisons are supported by references to hadith and the early history of the Prophet and his companions (sirat) . Manipulation of the historical past, the interpretation of which is often irrational, helps to give an emotional ("sacred") meaning to both the war itself and the heavy burdens and hardships at this time. It is in this sense that the mass of stories about the heroism of the Prophet, his companions, a whole galaxy of heroes of Islam during the Arab conquests of the 7-8 centuries are retold and interpreted.

Criticism of the "wrong jihad," explanation of the defeat. A number of ISIS defeats in the war in the Middle East are explained by all propagandists in approximately the same way: the lack of discipline and moral staunchness of the Mujahideen, discord between field commanders, intoxication with victories, cowardice of the Syrians themselves, etc.

"*Us*" and "*Them*" in the context of enmity with "others". At the heart of the total alienation of all Islamic radicals (and especially the propagandists of jihad) from «others» as a reference point and isolated self-identification remains a biasedly selected Islamic dogma. It structures the ideas and actions of the jihadists. Alienation from "infidels," "polytheists" etc. an innate trait of Islam, recorded in many verses of the Quran, sent down at a time when a small Islamic community had to conquer geographic and intellectual space surrounded by "infidels", often in armed conflicts. Precedents of hostility towards "others" are also found in the Sunnah. This determined the endogenous rejection of "infidels" in Islam, as incidentally, such alienation was and remains a natural "birthmark" in other mono-religions. These historical events, reflected in the Quran and Sunnah, are exploited by radicals and especially by jihadists.

For the protagonists of the jihad from Central Asia, the list of "aliens" includes secular regimes in countries with a Muslim majority, but also Muslims themselves, subordinate to these regimes. The apogee of the search for "strangers" was an attempt at family desocialization of the recipients. It is parents in whom the ideologues of the VE see the main obstacle to successful recruitment. In this, the Uzbek-speaking protagonists follow the established cliches of the ISIS ideologists, in which the opinion of the parents is recognized as secondary to the biasedly interpreted "prescriptions of Sharia." Total alienation from the old social networks claims to create a "pious Muslim" fighting for «correct Islam, a correct Islamic state,» creating an alternative society. However, this leads to the emergence of the phenomenon of group autocracy, built on the same group marginality in relation to the «Muslim majority» in the Central Asian countries. It is here that fakes and outright manipulations of real events are most often used.

²⁰ Archive: Абу Салох-Джиход фарзи Айн бо'лганда !!! (www.jannatoshiqlari.net).

²¹ Archive: t_video50781828519000342407.mp4. Studio lesson «Dunyo media. Ilmiy, ma'rifiy sahifa». Uloh Buhori, Lesson 5.

VALUES OF YOUTH IN UZBEKISTAN²²

In general, in Uzbekistan, the following values are a priority:

- "benevolence" - taking care of your loved ones and friends, justice for everyone, the importance of being healthy, loyal, having and providing a family, taking care of loved ones - this value is a priority in the value system of Uzbekistan's youth (84.2% of respondents chose). *This orientation found the greatest response in the narratives of the VE, namely the call to help Muslims suffering in the Middle East at the hands of unjust rulers, Muslims who are positioned as brothers and sisters of a single ummah, received the greatest representation and response.*

At the same time, in the VE narratives, those who can be close (for example, brothers / sisters in faith) are clearly differentiated, and who in no case should be considered as close (tagut, kafir, apostate, etc.). Kinship is no longer determined by blood ties, but by adherence to a common idea. People who are not in the inner circle are deprived of the right to care and are automatically assigned to the "Others" category, opposed to the "We" group.

The presence of this need for care can be realized in the country itself, a communication strategy indicating the direction of this assistance will allow this need to be realized in a socially approved way (assistance to the elderly, orphanages and other vulnerable groups).

- "independence" - the importance of making decisions on your own, being free, independent, knowing the world freedom of thought and action - this value was chosen by more than 76% of the respondents. Radical narratives affect only a certain part of a given value, curiosity and interest in the world. In the content analysis, it was revealed that involvement in closed groups where individual recruitment takes place is due to the main theme "Learn more about Islam" and calls to see a real war and participate in significant historical processes (holy war, the emergence of the caliphate, etc.). The realization of this need within the country is possible through the active involvement of young people in bright and eventful events.

- "universalism" - the importance of helping and mercy to other people, justice and well-being of all people, establishing peace - this value was chosen by 71.7% of the respondents. This value orientation is most clearly expressed in the narratives of the formation of the image of a hero who comes to the aid of the weak, saves them from the injustice of the modern world (Dar ul-Zulm). According to these narratives, both the image of the hero and the image of the enemy are formed. The enemy is an abstract collective image from which one needs to protect, but rarely a specific person. This need can also be realized with an emphasis on helping vulnerable groups in their country, but with an emphasis on publicity, expressed gratitude, scale and visibility of the assistance provided.

The value orientations of the observance of cultural and religious traditions are in the middle of the value hierarchy. But it should be noted that there is a tendency to follow religious traditions more than secular ones in Uzbekistan. Only 12.2% believe that the traditions of society (secular) are more significant than religious ones. However, the value orientation «Hedonism», which translates the importance of getting pleasure from life, enjoying the fullness of life, entered the triad of values of the Uzbek youth (71.9%).

Meanwhile, the studied narratives show that VE ideologists prefer to talk about limited physical pleasures (rejecting feasts, music, dances) and that any pleasure should be evaluated through the prism of "the pleasure of Allah," that is, from the point of view of the norms and ethics of Sharia as interpreted by the VE ideologists. Thus, the polls show that the religious rigorism imposed by the ideologues of radicalism is poorly or almost not perceived by the majority of young people. For example, in the course of field research, it was found that the concept of "fullness of life", in addition to the usual family values, the majority of respondents include material wealth (money), success in personal business and at the same time, adherence to Sharia norms, service to God. Consequently, the respondents themselves, especially young people, do not see serious contradictions in such a combination of ordinary physical pleasures (family and other celebrations with music, concerts, etc.), with everyday money-grubbing for profit, on the one hand, and restrictive religious ethics, on the other.

The attitude to hedonism as a part of earthly life with the restrictions of a religious order, shows that the bulk of young people are quite able to combine simple religious precepts, without asceticism, rigorism and fanaticism. Consequently, the enjoyment of life is allowed in socially approved forms. It is this tradition that is important to consolidate when it comes to the ideological aspects of counter-propaganda.

²² The results were obtained through a field study conducted in Uzbekistan between November and December 2020. In total, 1,000 people were interviewed in Uzbekistan, of which 49% were men, 51% were women. Of the total number of respondents, respondents aged 18-21 were 26.7%, 22-25 - 21.9% and 26-35 - 51.4%. By place of residence, 51% are urban dwellers and 49% are rural dwellers. According to the level of education, 14.3% have higher education, 60.7% - secondary specialized, 9% - incomplete higher, general secondary - 15.1%, 0.4% - have an academic degree and 0.4% - incomplete secondary education.

CONCLUSION

The main message of jihadists is the propaganda of "war for the sake of war." Criticism of the "wrong Islam at home," the trampled sharia, the "apostate/Tagut" regime, persecuting Muslims, calls to build a "real Islamic state" - all this becomes just a pretext for creating false illusions, a "better reward" for stamina and bravery.

The alternative communication offered by propagandists is based on the desire to impose "new" identities and norms on recipients on the basis of already existing value orientations that exist in society. This drift is reminiscent of sectarian practices and describes the desire to distance from others and an attempt to impose social norms within a group of "new brothers," shrouded in the eyes of a newcomer in an aura of glory, fearlessness, and willingness to sacrifice their lives for the triumph of "the laws of Allah." The propagandists manage to create the attractiveness of an imaginary neo-ummah," new stereotypes of thinking and behavior based on an emotional impulse, on the creation of a halo of staunch martyrs following the example of the Prophet and his companions. The most vulnerable victims of such ideological stereotypes are young people who are not involved in social networks, do not have clear ideological guidelines, and have not received sufficient immunity in the educational sphere.

In general, propaganda is aimed at the intellectual seizure of recipients who de facto become hostages of an ideology that was once alien to them. Terrorist radicalization is only the final stage of much more global diseases of society and mistakes in domestic politics and in media strategies. The analysis demonstrates how such factors of radicalization of a part of the youth as economic turmoil, ideological vacuum, non-competitiveness of the official ideology, social inequality, etc. become only concomitant factors. The lack of intelligible guidelines in secular forms of ideology is aggravated by the artificial cultivation of Islam, which has become a "parallel ideology," which is most open to the influence of jihadist ideology.

Religious communitarianism of "propagandists-mujahideen" should be interpreted not only from the point of view of "withdrawal" or the social exclusivity of ideology, but also from the point of view of "enthusiasm," when instead of problems or "life on the social sidelines" the propagandist speaks of a "great mission," duties to Allah and "oppressed Muslims," giving a messianic meaning to this trivial war for other people's political interests. Even if some of the countries in the region will declare Islam the state religion, but criticism of the protagonists of the jihad will not stop. For their goals go beyond the declared "victory of the decrees of Allah." The meaning of the existence of the carriers and protagonists of this ideology is in total alienation (both social and religious), which will always have a place in the complex collisions of the mod-

ern world. Consequently, for the foreseeable future, radical ideologies, as part of the security problem, will remain permanent. It should be about a competent strategy for its limitation and maximum localization of problems that stimulate the involvement of some Muslims in the networks of radicals.

Talking about the relative popularity of VE ideology in Uzbekistan, obviously, one should proceed from the following internal factors:²³

1. At present, the post-Soviet Islamization of society in Uzbekistan (as in the entire Central Asian region) continues, sometimes in an extremely conservative form, which complicates the forms of adaptation to modern realities, including the political system of a secular nature. This gives rise to religious and cultural conflicts within society, which are actively used by propagandists of jihad to build their criticism;
2. Attempts to create a "civil religion" under various ideological and propaganda clichés ("Enlightened Islam," "Tolerant Islam," etc.) are unsuccessful. These propaganda projects cannot be successful, since they do not take into account the inseparability of the norms of dogma in Islam, which, in particular, imply the implementation of a mega-project to Islamize the whole world, which is perceived by theologians as a natural process («illumination with the light of the truth of faith»). Differences among theologians on the ways and methods of achieving this goal are only noticeable in the forms of Islamization of the world (jihad, or "peaceful Islamization" using existing liberal-democratic or ideological instruments). Such goal-setting and dogmatic features of Islam are natural (as for most mono-religions), however, according to the norms of political correctness, they are silent, and the proposed liberal alternatives to create forms of "neo-Islam" are not perceived by believers. On the contrary, the ideologists of VE necessarily exploit these features of «Islam for the whole world,» having at their disposal serious argumentation from the Holy Texts.
3. The absence of a church hierarchy in Islam and consequently, the absence of codification of legal and dogmatic norms, leads to the dominance of individual evaluations of theologians of any phenomena, as well as interpretations of dogmas and norms of life. Consequently, the discussion of any issues related to attempts at modernization have turned and will turn into stormy and often fruitless discussions.

²³ A peculiar paradox of the listed factors is that they can simultaneously serve as a basis for the emergence of radical forms of Islam, as well as serve as restrictions in the spread of religiously motivated radicalism.

RECOMMENDATIONS:²⁴

In the field of Legislature

- It is necessary to adopt a new version of the Law on Combating Extremism (to replace the version written in 1999), abandoning the predominantly repressive interpretation of "extremism and radicalization" and adopting in a form close to international norms. At the same time, refrain from using accusatory labels that have a religious-ideological, but not legal origin (fundamentalism, Wahhabism, religious extremism).
- Consistent implication of the principle of equidistance of the state from all religious organizations, with confirmation of the principles of secularism.
- It is necessary to take care of that the existing legal resources are convenient and accessible for Muslims, without infringing on their rights. The most effective way is the active involvement of the state in the sphere of legal competition. If Muslims see that secular law offers a fair solution and is effective in the fight against corruption, then they will be quite satisfied, leaving Islam to regulating family relations and personal ethics. This way of narrowing the application of religious law and expanding the application of secular law seems to be the most acceptable given the conditions of Uzbekistan.
- To update and make available to the general public the lists of extremist and terrorist organizations banned in the country, with specific indications of the articles of the law and international acts, as well as the list of the main crimes on the basis of which they are outlawed.
- To develop a Code of functions of officials, increasing their responsibility in the frame of the Law and excluding from it an orientation towards religious ethics in official rhetoric and activities. In cooperation with the Ministry of Justice and the ministries of education, expand legal instruments to prevent the involvement of officials in religious propaganda, while maintaining professional neutrality, respecting the principle of secularism and laws.

IN THE FIELD OF LEGISLATIVE REGULATIONS OF THE MEDIA AND MEDIA STRATEGIES

- To systematize the legislative acts on the media. To outline the scope and limits of the rights and responsibilities of independent bloggers, including those who post religious content in a more expanded, clear way and in accordance with the existing international standards and regulations.
- To continue cooperation with stakeholders on the Internet and to develop contacts and direct dialogue with the administration of the main digital platforms to jointly develop tools for the automatic identification of destructive content (with the provision of an evidence base) and to remove them from the network.
- To legislatively establish the right and regulations for monitoring social networks (in platforms, channels, etc.) related to religious propaganda for law enforcement or analytical bodies of the state, to facilitate the development of proposals to increase the effectiveness of the fight against terrorist networks and to neutralize them.
- To develop and legislatively consolidate applied research of the content of radical propagandists in independent and state research centers, to promote their coordination and cooperation to study and identify strategies for «hiding» destructive content and an algorithm for its limitation.
- To improve the legal mechanisms and measures to block and delete on the Internet (especially in popular platforms) content that promotes extremist and terrorist ideology.
- To support and fund applied research (including independent programmers) to create programs for algorithmic content limitation of VEs.

²² More detailed recommendations for communication campaigns by the media, non-governmental organizations, government agencies and religious leaders in order to prevent violent extremism among the population are set out in the corresponding communication strategy for Uzbekistan.

IN THE FIELD OF COUNTERPROPAGANDA

- To strengthen the promotion of legal literacy in educational and other institutions, creating conditions for an open discussion of society's problems, primarily corruption. The obligatory context of the discussions is the secular nature of the political system and laws, as a guarantor of interfaith harmony and stability.
- State propaganda of «Islamic values» should be associated with its cultural and civilizational components, but not with dogma, which should be left as the prerogative of religious organizations and theologians themselves, regulating their activities exclusively by legal instruments.
- The state should avoid initiating using and replicating religious argumentation in the fight against the ideology of VE (there need not be new religious argumentation). This should also be the prerogative of theologians.
- To promote special courses in political literacy in the media and universities to form an adequate understanding of the political situation in the world and thereby form a correct understanding of real relations in the world arena. To revive the tradition of studying political Islam to raise public awareness of the negative processes taking place in the Islamic world and the consequences of the politicization of Islam.
- To encourage the mobility of interested civil society institutions to develop alternative counter-narratives, built not only and not so much on religious argumentation, encouraging alternative narratives but based on values of various types (including through humor, art, national ethics of tolerance, etc.) and supported by different voices (scientists, athletes, and women, online campaigners), for the widest possible audience, especially youth and women.
- To look for ways to destroy the charisma and theological authority of the “mentors” of VE ideology. For such «ignoble work» the propagandists themselves provide a lot of reasons. For example, by capitalizing their positions in the hierarchy of emirs and propagandists (in other words, laying hands on the budget of the mujahideen).
- To continue developing individual and targeted forms of counter-narrative, encouraging confidential interviews with repatriates, amnesty Muslims (especially young ones) who have been radicalized.
- To encourage and fund, where necessary, literacy and ethics courses for journalists and bloggers on the preparation and dissemination of religious materials.

This document is based on the study, «Radicalism Online: An Analysis of the Meanings, Ideas, and Values of Violent Extremism in Central Asia, which can be found on the websites of Internews and the Research Center for Religious Studies, as well as relevant country communication strategies.